



*Institute for
Research on
Public Policy*

*Institut de
recherche
en politiques
publiques*

**Four US Military
Commands: NORTHCOM
NORAD, SPACECOM,
STRATCOM — The
Canadian Opportunity**

Joseph T. Jockel

**IRPP Working Paper Series
no. 2003-03**

**Four US Military Commands:
NORTHCOM, NORAD, SPACECOM, STRATCOM — The Canadian Opportunity**

by Joseph T. Jockel
Canadian Studies Program
St. Lawrence University
Canton, New York

Part of the IRPP research program on National Security and Military Interoperability

ABSTRACT

- The US and Canada-US command structure for North American defence changed significantly in October 2002 and can be expected to change further.
- The best known of these changes was the creation of US Northern Command (NORTHCOM). It shares a commander-in-chief and a Colorado Springs, Colorado headquarters with the Canada-US North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD). Worries about NORTHCOM's implications for Canadian sovereignty and independence were wildly overblown. No Canadian forces are under NORTHCOM's command.
- Much less observed in Canada was the dissolution of US Space Command (SPACECOM). The Canadian military used to enjoy a close working relationship with SPACECOM, with which it previously shared a commander-in-chief and the Colorado headquarters. Most of SPACECOM's functions have been transferred to US Strategic Command (STRATCOM) which is also responsible for US nuclear weaponry.
- NORAD has retained a central place in North American aerospace defence because the command is responsible for warning and assessing the nature of a missile or air attack on this continent. But NORAD — and the Canadians who serve in it — will lose this central place if Canada does not agree to participate in the US missile defence system, which will become operational in 2004. If Ottawa says "no" to missile defence, NORAD will come to an end, in reality if not in name.
- NORAD also remains responsible for North American air defence, which since the September 11 atrocities has played a role in helping to prevent their being repeated. The air defence may be augmented over the next decade to deal with the growing threat posed by inexpensive cruise missiles.
- The US is still figuring out homeland defence, including its command arrangements. As this occurs, Canada is well placed in Colorado Springs to pursue its interests. The existing NORAD structure has been temporarily augmented by a binational planning group. NORAD and NORTHCOM will undoubtedly take new forms that will involve the Canadian military.

1. Putting NORTHCOM in Perspective

Much attention, probably too much, was paid in Canada to the US military's creation of Northern Command (NORTHCOM) in October 2002. With a formal area of operations encompassing the continental US, Alaska, Canada, Mexico and the surrounding waters out to about 500 nautical miles, NORTHCOM is responsible for the homeland defence of the US. It shares a commander-in-chief with the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), a longstanding Canada-US entity. Both are headquartered in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

The angst in Canada over NORTHCOM, encouraged by an excessively alarmist report commissioned by the Simons Centre for Peace and Disarmament Studies (whose co-director is Lloyd Axworthy, the CEO of UBC's Liu Institute for Global Issues) and written by a North Carolina-based legal scholar, verged at times on the paranoid. There were worries that NORTHCOM soon would be given command over the Canadian military, which has not happened. And there were more worries that if it ever were given authority over Canadians, a future possibility which cannot be excluded, it could run roughshod over a whole host of Canadian practices, such as bilingualism, women in combat and homosexuals in the military. These worries overlooked the longstanding difference between "command," which always rests in national hands, and "operational command" or "operational control," which is given to international or multinational commands such as NORAD. To put all this as directly as possible: if there are today francophone lesbians flying CF-18s out of Bagotville, Quebec or Cold Lake, Alberta on North American air defence missions, NORAD could not say anything about it. (Nor would it want to, but that's another matter.)

Overshadowed by NORTHCOM was another US command change which took place the same day NORTHCOM came into existence and which will have equal, if not greater, impact on Canadian interests: US Space Command (SPACECOM) was dissolved and its responsibilities transferred to US Strategic Command (STRATCOM), which is headquartered at Offutt Air Force Base, Nebraska. The Chrétien government and officials in the Department of National Defence have not appeared to be keen to

underline this development in their official utterances about the command changes in the US and the impact of these changes on Canadian interests.

2. The Importance of SPACECOM

From its creation in 1985 to its dissolution in 2002, SPACECOM shared with NORAD a commander-in-chief and the Colorado Springs headquarters, the famous combat operations center under nearby Cheyenne Mountain. Initially, SPACECOM was seen as problematic in Canada. A parliamentary committee reported in 1986 that the new command (and a related US Air Force command) had led to "considerable public confusion about the role of Canadians in the chain of command and control at Colorado Springs." Worse, many witnesses before the committee had found SPACECOM to be "especially ominous," a view the Tory majority on the committee did not share.¹ Some people feared the NORAD-SPACECOM relationship might constitute a back door through which Canada might be dragged into two bugaboos of the day: President Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative (a research and development program for missile defence) and the weaponization of space.

These worries eventually abated, largely when the US never deployed either missile defences or weapons in space. Moreover, the potential advantages to Canada of the close ties between SPACECOM and NORAD soon became apparent, especially to the Canadian military. The Canadian Forces have had a lengthy (and expensive) list of space capabilities they have wished to acquire simply to support the army, navy and air force. After 1985 Canadian personnel were in close proximity to US military space operations and sought to draw upon it in pursuing their own space projects.

It is difficult to assess how well that proximity actually paid off to Canada. There is no doubt though that Canadians got progressively closer to SPACECOM. A couple of years ago a senior Canadian air force general took to cautioning that Canadians were not in Colorado Springs to infiltrate SPACECOM. But in a way, they did. When the command was first established, it was intended to be entirely American. Although it was to work closely with NORAD, supplying it in particular with information on ballistic missiles

launches and trajectories and on events in space, a firm institutional line was supposed to separate it from NORAD. Only the commander-in-chief and his immediate staff were in both commands. This reflected not so much Canadian sensitivities as a definite lack of interest at the time on the part of the US in involving any other country, even Canada, in its military space operations. In the ensuing seventeen years, however, that line became fainter. Joint NORAD-SPACECOM staffs were established, including a key one within Cheyenne Mountain, and in some instances Canadian personnel joined SPACECOM staffs. (There remained, however, SPACECOM entities at headquarters that were strictly American.)

3. SPACECOM gone while NORAD remains

The dissolution of SPACECOM and the transfer of its most important responsibilities to STRATCOM have two potential implications for Canada. First, it might make access to US military space planning and operations more difficult for the Canadian military, especially since those operations no longer fall under the same commander as NORAD.

Second, NORAD has now openly been brought into a much closer working relationship with STRATCOM; once the realization of this sinks in among Canadians there might at some point be a certain amount of renewed nuclear discomfort. STRATCOM is, after all, also the command that is responsible for US nuclear weaponry and many Canadians like to imagine that their country has little involvement with nuclear weaponry, especially since the Canadian Forces shed the last of their own capability to use (air defence) nuclear weapons in the early 1980s. In reality, Canadian air defence forces, ever since they were first deployed in the early days of the Cold War, have been and have remained part and parcel of US nuclear warfighting strategies, which once were especially important in reassuring western Europeans that they would not be victims of Soviet aggression. From time to time Ottawa sought to deny this, and to claim, inaccurately, that the strategic purpose of North American air defence was just "to protect the deterrent" and thereby promote nuclear strategic stability. While the new NORAD-STRATCOM relationship changes nothing here fundamentally, it might make Canada's relationship with nuclear weapons a little too obvious for political comfort.

Or perhaps not. It may be that now with the Cold War more than a decade past and fears of nuclear war having both faded and been surpassed by fears of terrorism, very few Canadians are prepared to get worked up any more over Canada's role in US nuclear strategy, or over nuclear strategy at all. Canadian peace groups were unable to elicit any real national indignation in 2002 when elements of the Bush Administration's "Nuclear Posture Review" were leaked. That document apparently envisages the possibility of relying on nuclear weapons to deter the use of chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction in the hands of non-nuclear adversaries and, to that end, the development of new types of nuclear weapons, so-called bunker busters. Nonetheless, Canadian officialdom still appears to be wary of the potential political impact of the arrival of STRATCOM in Colorado Springs and for that reason may not be unhappy that media attention has focused on the creation of NORTHCOM.

The integration of SPACECOM's most important functions into STRATCOM also does not fundamentally alter the roles of NORAD and of Canadians in it. NORAD ceased years ago to be principally an air defence command. Its chief task is to warn of and assess a nuclear attack on the continent. In NORAD parlance this is called Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment (ITWAA). In fact, a more accurate, if clumsy name for the command, based on what it does, would be the North American Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment and Air Defence Command. To provide ITWAA, NORAD relies on information from STRATCOM (previously, from SPACECOM) about ballistic missile launches and trajectories, and events in space, and on information from the Canadian and US air defence systems concerning aircraft movement. Canadian air force generals at Colorado Springs (among them the NORAD deputy commander) take their turns in the rotation as "assessors," ready to confirm that North America is under attack, based on information given them by a binational NORAD-NORTHCOM staff in the Cheyenne Mountain operations center.

4. Canada and Missile Defence

The United States would trust the military of no other ally in the assessor position, not even the British. It is

striking that the US still feels this way, given how little Canada contributes to North American aerospace defence. There are, in particular, no systems to detect missiles or events in space that are operated by the Canadian military or located in Canada.

In December 2002 President Bush directed the US defence department to field an initial missile defence of the US by 2004. Twenty ground-based interceptors will be divided between Fort Greely, Alaska and Vandenberg Air Force Base, California. Plans also call for 20 sea-based interceptors to be deployed by 2005. The system used to be called "National Missile Defense," or NMD, but the term was dropped in order to emphasize that the US hopes to eventually provide missile defences for its forces overseas, its friends and its allies.

Canada's privileged place in Colorado Springs will come to an end — and with it, NORAD — if Ottawa refuses to allow the Canadian military to become involved in the operation of the US missile defence system. The US military's planning assumption is that the battle management of the system would be closely linked to ITWAA. This only makes sense, since there would be only minutes available for decision making. So if Canadian Forces personnel could not be involved in operating the system, they also could not fully participate in ITWAA.

Structurally, the end of NORAD would not be difficult to engineer. Arrangements have long existed whereby a US command could take over NORAD in the event that the Canadian command structure, Canadian forces did not. This occurred most recently during the 1973 Yom Kippur war when President Nixon wanted to use an alert to send a message to the Soviets, and Ottawa demurred. At NORAD's dissolution, should it come to that, NORTHCOM could assume this responsibility permanently, although the US might then take the opportunity to reshuffle further its major command arrangements.

Canada-US air defence co-operation would still be necessary and may in fact in the coming years become somewhat more important. Conceivably a small Canada-US air defence command could be created, which would also provide information to whichever US command had been given ITWAA. The air

defence command might even bear the name NORAD in order to smooth over the rupture. But such an air defence command would not be necessary; the sort of close Canada-US air defence co-operation that existed before 1957 (when there were no fewer than seventy-five US continental air defence squadrons and nine Canadian squadrons) would do.

Many Canadians ask, What good would a missile defence system do? seeing that terrorists struck such a grievous blow with domestic airliners the last time and could perhaps use "suitcase bombs" the next. Yet in several ways the arguments for the missile defence of the US may have been strengthened by the terrorist attacks. First, in the wake of the shock those attacks produced, the US can be expected in the coming years to attempt to defend itself against a full range of threats, including both missiles and suitcase bombs. Second, it is now evident that all threats cannot be deterred if the attackers are prepared to commit suicide; an attack defence is necessary. And finally, no US president will ever want his country to suffer again what it did in September 2001, so the possession by a hostile country of just a few missiles tipped with weapons of mass destruction could very well be enough to deter the US from intervening abroad militarily, except where its most vital interests were at stake. The presence of a defence against such missiles would make all the difference.

It is a pretty good bet that Ottawa is going to allow the Canadian Forces to be involved in the operation of the new missile defence system. The Canadian government will not want to give up the advantages NORAD provides. Moreover, participating in missile defence will probably entail little more than agreeing to allow Canadians to be part of battle management in Colorado Springs. No missile defence interceptors (or sensors, for that matter) will be located in Canada or directly operated by the Canadian Forces. Canada may also agree to undertake another space-related responsibility not immediately tied to the missile defence system. In mid-2003 it appeared that by the fall Ottawa would announce its decision, but the matter has been left for the incoming Martin government to deal with in 2004.

5. Central Aims and Traditional Antiaircraft Defence

Ottawa's most immediate arms control worry over the US plans for missile defence, that they would threaten reductions in strategic nuclear weaponry by Russia and the US, has melted away. Such fears were largely based on the Russians' refusal to agree to amendments to the 1972 US-USSR Antiballistic Missile Treaty, which banned most missile defences, and Russian threats to put a stop to the reduction of strategic weaponry. However, when President Bush called the Russian bluff in late 2001 by announcing the US withdrawal from the treaty, (coupled with unilateral reductions in US strategic nuclear weapons) President Putin reacted calmly, saying that the step did not threaten Russian security.

A longer-term Canadian arms control concern is the weaponization of space. That is not on the table now. The US missile defences that have been authorized and that are now under construction do not include any space-based weapons, although detection and communication satellites are involved. For that matter, the US currently has no plans to place *any* weapon in space. But there is no guarantee this will continue. Many US missile defence proponents fervently hope that the system eventually will be expanded to include space-based weapons. Nonetheless, a Canadian decision to participate in the system that will soon become operational will not commit Ottawa to remain engaged if the US ever deploys weapons in space, to which Canada would object.

Immediately after September 11, NORAD's oldest mission, air defence, made something of a comeback as NORAD sought to close the gaps within the perimeter that the murderers had exploited. Fighter aircraft were sent to patrol in the vicinity of several North American cities, most notably, of course, New York and Washington, and procedures were put into place in both countries for giving fighter pilots orders to destroy any hijacked planes that threatened a repeat of the calamities. (In the US two regional air defence commanders have been given the authority to order such destruction; in Canada the government has kept such authority in its own hands.) Moreover, five NATO airborne warning and control system aircraft were deployed temporarily from Germany to Oklahoma, new ground radars were put in place, and communication and coordination were strengthened between the air defence and civil aviation authorities. While several months later there was a noticeable relaxation in those efforts, a year after the attacks anti-terrorist air defence measures were once again stepped up, including the brief deployment of surface-to-

air missiles near Washington. Today, it is impossible to say whether such efforts will continue for long and, if so, at what level of intensity. They may remain essential elements in the continuing struggle against terrorism. On the other hand, they may be rendered unnecessary by improvements in airport and on-board security arrangements, intelligence and law enforcement successes, and progress in the war against terrorism being waged overseas.

6. The Cruise Missile Threat to North America

Even if heightened air defences will no longer be necessary to deal with hijacked aircraft, there may be substantive new investment in air defences against another threat, namely low technology, land-attack cruise missiles, especially those which might be acquired by terrorists or rogue states. In fact, in the face of North American vulnerability to such weapons, there has for several years been talk of a "National Cruise Missile Defence" (NCMD).

Low-technology cruise missiles are cheap to build or even to buy as off-the-shelf items from a growing list of arms manufacturers. Any one can be equipped with a conventional explosive, or a chemical, biological or even nuclear warhead, and a GPS-based guidance system. They currently have a range of about 500 km; this might be extended in the coming years to around 1000 km. Although these ranges are not great, it is worrying that such missiles can be launched from aircraft or sea vessels, including merchant ships, off North America's long Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Still more worrying, in the words of a December 2000 study prepared by the MIT Lincoln Laboratory, "The United States and Canada do not possess a viable defensive counter," to the cruise missile threat.² Although cruise missiles would be launched from sea toward NORAD's current coastal radar perimeter, they would be too small and fly too low to be detected readily, rendering fighter aircraft useless against them. This has led NORAD officials to describe their command's current capabilities as being able to detect but not destroy incoming ballistic missiles, while at the same time being able to destroy but not detect incoming cruise missiles.

The governments of the US and Canada will be facing the decision of whether to equip their air defenses to deal with this threat. Recently, US Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld commissioned a new study of the options. A full-scale NCMD would be far from cheap inasmuch as it would face the difficult task of being able to detect and destroy small moving objects over a vast area. Of course, more money will be available in the US for homeland defence purposes. But the risks of cruise missile attacks will have to be weighed against the costs of defending against other threats to US security. More modest goals for a NCMD than attempting complete coverage might make sense. These would range from the simple ability to identify correctly the source of an attack, to providing warning time to high-value targets, to deploying only limited regional defences.

Compared to the responsibilities that STRATCOM has inherited from SPACECOM for North American defense, and to those which NORAD has retained, NORTHCOM seems, at the moment, to be quite a limited affair, for all the attention it has garnered. NORTHCOM's immediate responsibilities include focusing on rapid responses to major terrorist attacks (including those with weapons of mass destruction) and natural disasters. It would be given operational command over US military forces responding to such catastrophes, especially those in aid of the civil power, to use the Canadian term. Unlike NORAD, which retains operational control over air defence forces that have to be able to react swiftly and may also cross the Canada-US border, NORTHCOM has been given no similar standing operational command. However, it will have operational command over the new missile defences. Presumably it would, in the event of a calamity, principally call upon army and National Guard units. It can be added that NORTHCOM also has not yet been given standing operational command over any naval forces, which can be of importance in anti-terrorist operations in coastal and off-shore waters and which would play an important role in any new NCMD, although naval (and Coast Guard) officers are involved in the new command.

7. The Canadian Opportunity as US Homeland Defence Evolves

The US military is still figuring out homeland defence. For the immediate future, taking the lead in such

thinking and planning may very well be NORTHCOM's most important function. Thereafter, further US command changes may emerge, especially since the arrangements that were put into place in October 2001 involve at least four awkward elements: 1) Placing responsibilities for elements of both strategic defense and strategic offense under a single command (STRATCOM) flies in the face of a very longstanding understanding within the US military that these two are better kept apart. 2) The coordination of naval and Coast Guard responsibilities with other elements of homeland defense, especially air defence, is not completely provided for. 3) US military space efforts seem to have been organizationally downgraded with the dissolution of SPACECOM, despite Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld's interest, upon taking office, in strengthening space operations. 4) Canada's involvement in missile defence has not been approved yet by Ottawa.

Meanwhile, as the US military considers the future of homeland defence, including any further command changes, Canada is well placed to pursue its interests. The Canadian military is very close to NORTHCOM, but not in it. It has special access to the NORTHCOM commander-in-chief, because he is also at the head of NORAD. Moreover, the Department of National Defence has sent a planning group to Colorado Springs to work with NORTHCOM.

The situation resembles the early 1950s. At that time, the US was struggling to coordinate its air defences against the growing threat posed by Soviet long-range bombers. The air force, army, and navy all had continental air defence tasks, which in 1954 were brought under the aegis of the newly-created US Continental Air Defense Command (CONAD) at Colorado Springs. Then, too, the Canadian military sent a planning group to work with the new command. The result was the creation of NORAD in 1957. NORTHCOM and NORAD undoubtedly will take new forms in the not so distant future, and these forms will certainly include the Canadian military.

1. Canada, House of Commons, Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence, *NORAD 1986*, Report of the Standing Committee, 1986.

2. Briefing slides, Lee O. Upton, "National Cruise Missile Defense Study," Lincoln Laboratory, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, December 2000.